

# Embracing change. Shaping futures.

## Strategic Business

**Leader** – The importance of  
effective communication for SBL

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## The tools you will need

**The current P1 and P3 exams will be removed following the June 2018 exam session and an exciting new exam – Strategic Business Leader (SBL) will be introduced from September 2018. The new exam will provide you with the real life skills to make you even more effective in the workplace.**

In the examination, candidates will be presented with all of the information needed to refer to, including background information and exhibits, alongside the various tasks to be completed by the student. This information and specific exhibits may take a variety of forms such as annual and integrated reports, media sources (such as webpages and newspaper articles), presentations, spreadsheets, tables, briefing notes, interview transcripts and meeting minutes. However, this list is not exhaustive, as the examiner may present information in a variety of formats that best reflect and convey the context of the scenario which is being examined.

Importantly, not only will candidates be presented with a range of information sources, they will also have to present their responses to each requirement using a specified format, as asked for in the requirement. Therefore, it is the purpose of this article to highlight the main forms of response that candidates may be required to present in the SBL answers and importantly, how these should be presented. Note, that some formats will be explained in more detail, where it is considered relevant. Also, bear in mind that these are suggested layouts and alternative approaches, if suitable to the context of the question, will be rewarded.

Always make sure that you begin a letter/ memo and/or email with the address header which should look something like this for an email:

To:  
From:  
Date:  
Subject:

Dear

Sincerely  
(Name of author)

### Letters, emails and memos

In terms of style and content, a letter and an email are essentially the same, except that a letter sent in hard copy is usually more formal in tone as it is usually sent in that format for a particular reason. An e-mail is an electronic version of a letter. However, sometimes the style may be different depending on the recipient. In the SBL examination the style is likely to be very similar as you will be writing to a senior level audience in most cases which will require a formal approach in both cases.

Importantly, letters, memos and emails must be set at the correct tone. In the examination you will be taking on the role or roles of senior management positions, reporting to Board level or outside stakeholders such as shareholders and external clients/ customers. Therefore, the tone and clarity is very important. Letters memos and emails at this level are unlikely to be informal, so do not use 'text-speak' (ie shortened words or phrases). However, these should be kept concise, to the point and well-structured, as would be expected in a professional context.

! See Specimen 2, Question 2b for an example of a letter format.

## Reports

A report is an often used format in an examination context, as it provides candidates the opportunity to present well-formulated and structured answers at some length. These are often required when an overall recommendation is required by the candidate or an analysis or evaluation of an issue is required.

Reports should have a clear and well defined structure, as follows:

**To:**

**From:**

**Subject Header:**

(Name of the Report)

### Introduction

Setting out the reason for writing the report and its main aims.

### Main Body

Two or three structured paragraphs containing analysis/ evaluation of the main content of the report.

### Concluding comments/ recommendations

Summary of findings with recommendations for further action (if asked for).

Again remember, the tone of the report will be very important and must be set at a strategic level and pitched at the right audience.

**!** See Specimen 2, Question 3a for a report format question.

## Presentation slides and notes

Presentation slides and accompanying notes are a useful tool to convey information concisely to a wide audience. They are often used to introduce/ explain concepts or issues to those with less knowledge/ information. In the examination, presentation slides will normally require accompanying notes. Alternatively, the examiner could indeed ask you to just provide the notes, in the form of speaker's notes which would be used to accompany a set of slides. The examiner may prescribe the number of slides to be prepared or you may have to use your own judgement as to the number of slides required. This is likely to depend on how many tasks you are asked to cover.

If asked to prepare slides, then it is important to remember that each slide needs to create immediate impact, be quick and easy to read for the audience and presented in a clear concise way. Each slide should contain between three and five fairly brief bullet points encapsulating the content to the audience. Slides should be produced with accompanying notes, to explain the bullet points more fully. These notes must be directly linked to the points made on the slide. Remember, these are the speaker's notes and you may be preparing this presentation for another senior manager. Therefore, they must be able to understand how the notes link to and explain the bullet points.

### Slide header

- Bullet point 1
- Bullet point 2
- Bullet point 3

### Notes page

Explanation/ Reasoning of the slide

Explanation of bullet point 1

Explanation of bullet point 2

Explanation of bullet point 3

**!** See Specimen 2, Question 3b for a presentation format question.

### Visual aids, such as grids or heat maps

Sometimes an exam may require the candidate to create a visual aid as a task or part of it. Examples of this would be to construct a Mendelow's matrix, a BCG matrix, or plot risks on a heat map which are visualizations that present the results of a risk assessment. For example, in a risk assessment process, the ability to visualize risks helps to establish and communicate a holistic view of risks affecting the organization. Risk heat maps are often used to convey the potential likelihood and impact of risks so that strategic decisions can be made for the health of the organization. In a Mendelow matrix a candidate may need to decide where to position or move the relative positions of stakeholders based on their power and interest as related to a stakeholder engagement strategy.

Once risks have been assessed in an organization, the risk heatmap shows four relative values dependent on the impact and likelihood of the risk. The areas of greater concern are represented in the upper right quadrant of the risk heatmap, and the areas of lower concern are represented in the lower right quadrant.

! See specimen 1 Question 2a for a Heat map format question.



### Briefing notes/ briefing papers and working notes

As the names indicate, briefing notes, papers or working notes are intended to be short and to the point, but have no real formal structure as they are intended as advisory documents for other people such as senior managers or board directors to help them communicate more formally both verbally or in writing to a selected audience. Therefore, there is no recognised, formal structure, but students must understand that these differ from reports, in that they do not require opinions/ conclusions/ recommendations. Instead, they should be merely informative and factual in order for the recipient to form an objective opinion of the facts presented.

**Communicate more formally both verbally or in writing.**

! See Specimen 2, Question 1a for a briefing note format question.

## Press release

A press release is a very useful communication tool to convey information about the organisation to external stakeholders such as customers, investors, suppliers and the general public. It is important that the content of press releases is factual and concise, conveying the most important information to the relevant stakeholder group(s) we are trying to communicate with. The main purpose of all press releases is to promote something significant and specific.

A press release serves three marketing and promotional purposes:

- To let stakeholders know about an event
- To let the media know about the business
- To help promote our business' appearance or credibility.

### Press release

*(For release date/ time)*

Short, factual paragraphs

### Ending

For more information, press only:

*PR Contact Name*

*Phone number*

*Email*

**The main purpose of all press releases is to promote something significant and specific.**

## Project Initiation Document (PID)

A PID is one of the most significant tools in project management, which provides the foundation for the business project. The Project Initiation Document provides a reference point throughout the project for both the customer and the Project Team and should **normally** include the following sections (where sufficient information is presented in the exhibits):

**PID is one of the most significant tools in project management.**

- Project Goals
- Scope
- Project Organization
- Business Case
- Constraints
- Stakeholders
- Risks
- Project Controls
- Reporting frameworks
- PID Sign Off
- Summary

! See Specimen 2 Question 5b for a PID format question.

## General professionalism

**'Communication' is one of the five SBL professional skills. In each examination you will be tested on your communication skills through the 'communication' professional skill. This will require you to use the communication tool requested by the examiner appropriately and effectively within the particular question that this skill is assigned to.**

However, it is also important for students to understand that communication in fact forms part of all of the professional skills, through the appropriate and correct use of these presentation formats discussed in the previous section of this article. Therefore, if candidates use the format appropriately then it is highly likely that they will earn more professional marks even if communication is not the specific professional skill being assessed in that particular requirement.

For example, if the professional skill being examined is 'Evaluation' skills and candidates have been asked to write a report to the Board of Directors, then if the candidate's answer has not presented a report or has presented the report badly for example, there is no proper introduction and a lack of overall concluding comments or recommendations, then full professional marks will not be awarded to the candidate, even if all the specific evaluation criteria for full marks have been met.

Therefore, do not think that 'communication' is only tested within the communication professional skill. Sound and effective communication is required throughout the examination and should be considered when answering all of the questions. Markers will be looking for strong and effective communication in every answer which will demonstrate strong professionalism in all answers.



## Communication tools used in the Exhibits

**The communication formats highlighted above are the ones most likely to be required of the candidates in presenting their own answers to the questions asked. However, it is also worth giving a brief mention of the additional communication tools which could be used by the examiners to present information to the candidates:**

### Meeting minutes/ transcripts

These are useful for the examiner to convey the opinions of senior leaders through the comments that they make about organisational issues. Candidates should read these comments and opinions thoroughly, to try to understand more clearly the personalities of the meeting members and their viewpoints on strategic issues. These will often be at Board level and will be focused on one specific strategic issue.

**!** See Specimen 1 and 2 for examples of both formal meeting minutes (Specimen 2) and a transcript of a discussion between a management consultant and the CEO (Specimen 1).

### Website homepage

An organisation's website home page is normally the main page a visitor navigating to a website from a web search engine will see. The home page is used to facilitate navigation to other pages on the site by providing information on and links to its products and services, its organisation structure, recent articles and its history. It is a useful tool for the examiner to set the context of an organisation and highlight its main features and activities.

**!** See Specimen 2 for an example of an extract from a company's homepage.

## Risk register

A risk register is an important and practical tool that all companies should now produce. It needs to be reviewed regularly and this is likely to be what will be asked of candidates in an SBL examination context. The risk register is often laid out in a tabular format and nowadays is an integral part of companies reporting and is a requirement of investors.

**A risk register is an important and practical tool that all companies should now produce.**

The main aspects of a risk register will be:

- The **title** of the risk
- The **likelihood** of the risk – normally measured on a scale of 1 (unlikely) to 5 (highly likely)
- The **impact** of the risk – Again likely to be graded from 1 (low) to 5 (high impact)
- The risk **owner** – usually a manager or a director
- The **date** the risk was identified and the date it was last given consideration
- **Mitigating actions** should be listed ie what has the business done to reduce the risk and what are its intended future actions to mitigate the risk.

Be prepared to evaluate and comment on a risk register and possibly formulate or improve on one.

Other formats that the examiner may use to convey industry/ organisational information could include:

- Newspaper articles
- ! See Specimen Paper 2
- Spreadsheets
- ! See Specimen Paper 1 and 2
- Industry research articles
- Chairman's Statement or other extracts from a company's Annual Report
- ! See Specimen Paper 1

As stated earlier in this article, this list is not exhaustive and there are many alternative formats that the examiners could select to present relevant organisational/ industry relevant information. Therefore, you must be prepared to analyse and evaluate a wide range of information sources effectively within the examination hall in order to communicate effectively. Make sure that in preparation for this examination, you read widely, both traditional and online media and familiarise yourself with a range of information sources used by modern businesses.

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